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PREPARATIONS FOR THE SPECIAL SESSION OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY FOR THE PURPOSE OF AN OVERALL REVIEW AND APPRAISAL OF THE IMPLEMENTATION OF AGENDA 21

Summary report of the dialogue session with women

(14 April 1997)

Chairperson: Ambassador Monika Linn-Locher (Switzerland), Vice-Chairperson, Commission on Sustainable Development

Facilitator: Ms. Bella Abzug, Women's Environment and Development Organization, United States of America

Presenters: Representatives of the following women's organizations made presentations: Country Women Association of Nigeria; Women Food and Agriculture Working Group/Via Campesina; Central and Eastern European Network for Sustainable Development; Redeh of Brazil; Movement for Nuclear Safety; Women in Europe for a Sustainable Future.

PRESENTATIONS

In the closing years of the twenty-first century, women from all classes, cultures and backgrounds have come to serve as catalysts for environmental and democratic activism. Yet, despite the 1995 Beijing Conference and the five years that have passed since the Rio Conference, gaps between rich and poor, North and South, and men and women are still prominent features of our society. In their dialogue session with Government, women highlighted these problems, the obstacles they face in confronting them, and recommendations for future action.

Activities

Agenda 21 is seen as the first step towards promoting women's rights and consideration of gender issues at the global level. Since then, other international conferences, particularly the Beijing Conference in 1995, have furthered the objectives outlined in Agenda 21. A number of relevant initiatives have been taken by and for women. For example:

- The Women's Caucus has enabled women to participate in international negotiations and policy-making.

- The 1995 Beijing Conference was instrumental in calling attention to poverty and its effects on the lives of women.

- The 1997 Micro-Summit in Washington, D.C., highlighted the importance of providing credit to poor women. This Summit led to the decision to provide $21.7 billion in micro-credit to poor people by the year 2005.

- The Women's Food Summit called attention to linkages between sustainable development and world food security.

- Local Agenda 21 efforts are successfully under way around the world. They have helped strengthen mechanisms to integrate women in decision-making processes and are helping to alter unsustainable production and consumption patterns.

Obstacles

Women are key to achieving sustainable development. Thus, the inequities and prejudices that confront women also hinder general progress towards sustainability. Specific obstacles concern lack of representation and credit, as well as poverty, trade and debt-related issues.

- Although women constitute over 50 per cent of the world's population, women constitute far less than the same ratio in Governments throughout the world.

- Participation by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the United Nations is limited and stifles the important voice of women.

- Lack of credit for women prevents them from achieving financial independence.

- Barriers to land ownership by women not only stifle their prospects for financial independence but also create disincentives for following sustainable practices.

- Trade imbalances and debt crises contribute to poverty-related problems which are particularly troubling for women.

- The growing emphasis on food as a commodity and on agro-business has negative effects regarding sustainable agriculture and world food security. This has important implications for women farmers, as well as for the well-being of women and children.

- Testing of toxic materials, radioactive pollution and the use of pesticides are violating the health and reproductive rights of women.

- The rights of indigenous women are not recognized.

- Current modes of advertising denigrate women and contribute to unsustainable patterns of production and consumption.

Priorities

Women's representatives raised the following priorities for consideration by the Commission on Sustainable Development and other actors involved in the sustainable development process:

- Develop mechanisms that promote representation of women in Government.

- Improve access to credit to empower women and combat poverty.

- Make efforts to support women to run for and be elected to government office.

- Provide equal access to education.

- Give more attention to the role of advertising in furthering gender stereotypes and unsustainable production and consumption patterns.

- Identify instruments, such as subsidy removal and taxes, which have been successful in counteracting problematic commercial advertising.

- Learn from the Local Agenda 21 initiatives.

- Examine industrial "hot spots" where careless practices have resulted in environmental damage and deleterious effects regarding women and children.

- Prevent a market in radioactive wastes.

DIALOGUE

Representatives of the following Governments made statements: Australia, Canada, China, Cuba, Egypt, Finland, Netherlands, Norway, Peru, Philippines, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Representatives of the International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW) and the Campaign for the Earth International, a non-governmental organization, also made statements.

Some government representatives described their efforts in micro-financing (Australia, Bangladesh, Netherlands, Switzerland) and in mainstreaming women's concerns (Philippines, China). Others identified poverty as the main obstacle to achieving the goals outlined at the Beijing Conference and urged countries to promote capacity-building for women and provide special attention to women in indigenous communities (Peru). The representative of INSTRAW noted poverty issues concerning women.

Government representatives also discussed the role of women in agricultural production (Sweden) and trade, including export-driven, monoculture economies (Cuba, Netherlands), food security and hostile food policies (Cuba). One government representative noted linkages between the transboundary movement of hazardous material and women's health (Australia).

Several government representatives noted the importance of addressing the role of men and how men perceive themselves in society (Sweden). Some government representatives noted that gender issues required policies for men as well as women (Sweden, Norway). For example, some countries require parental leave for men (Norway).

One government representative noted that regional or global hot-spot designations are not feasible for certain environmental problems and that national designations would be necessary in most cases (Egypt). Some government representatives noted that the conclusions of the Commission on the Status of Women should be incorporated into the decisions of the Commission on Sustainable Development (Finland).

CHALLENGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE COMMISSION ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

- Identify instruments that have been successful in combating harmful commercial advertising.
- Identify industrial hot spots and prepare a plan to clean these areas.
- Strengthen the role of women in efforts to implement Agenda 21. In doing this, the Commission should examine examples of successful efforts to increase participation.
- Recognize that the outcome of the Micro-Summit has important implications for rural women.
- Earmark 1 per cent of all aid dispersed via the World Bank or regional development banks to assist women.